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ABSTRACT

Procedures that have been developed for switching from a graded to a nongraded pattern of school organization have frequently failed to live up to their expectations. There appears to be a need for more clearly defined procedures and purposeful innovation as distinct from change for its own sake. Nongrading should serve to provide alternative learning environments for the student rather than to facilitate the roles of the teacher and the administrator. The literature in this review challenges each school to implement the basic concept by devising those methods particularly suited to its situation. Guides to the implementation process emphasize the central role of administrative leadership. Several case studies show how schools have worked with the challenge of nongrading. (Author)

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Nongraded Schools

Warren Mellor

> There is little doubt in my mind that the climb toward nongrading our schools is stalled on a plateau of inadequate understanding. At least part of the problem stems from inadequate and incomplete conceptualizations. Not enough attention has been given to spelling out how the components of schooling are affected when the values basic to nongrading are applied. . . .
>
> Our failure to produce nongraded schools does *not* result from not trying. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that the efforts have been misguided or even not guided. Somewhere between the presently developed, limited conceptualization of nongrading and detailed instructions on how to implement nongrading lies the fruitful area of developing alternative models.
>
> *Goodlad* in *Purdom (1970)*

Adequate provision for individual pupil differences is at the heart of the nongraded school concept. To date, however, plans that have been developed for moving from a graded to a nongraded pattern have not always lived up to their promises. Nongraded organization varies widely, and the indiscriminate use of related terms such as continuous progress plans, ungraded schools, and multigraded organizations has done little to clarify the situation.

Current writers express a growing disillusionment with the persistence of traditional grading practices in nongraded schools. There is a need for clearly defined procedures and purposeful innovation as distinct from change for its own sake. Nongrading should serve to provide alternative learning environments for the student rather than to facilitate the roles of the teacher and the administrator.

The literature in this review challenges each school to implement the basic concept by devising those methods particularly suited to its situation. Guides to the implementation process emphasize the central role of administrative leadership. Several case studies show how schools have worked with the challenge of nongrading. The indefinite and often conflicting results obtained when comparing graded and nongraded programs point up the large number of components involved in nongrading and are due in some measure to the lack of precise models.

Of the documents reviewed, sixteen are available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Complete instructions for ordering are given at the end of the review.

CONVERSION TO NONGRADED ORGANIZATION

Most schools today lie somewhere along the graded-nongraded continuum (Tewksbury 1967). In a fully graded plan all children in a given grade are expected to do the same work in a year's time. In a nongraded program the child works in each subject at the level for which he is ready. Three possible ways of implementing a nongraded program are suggested:

- provide multilevel instruction in a self-contained, heterogeneous classroom
- assign children to self-contained classes according to performance levels
- regroup a large aggregation of children from time to time to form classes that work at different levels under different teachers

Graves (1967) presents guidelines for adopting a nongraded organization in elementary schools. He feels there are four major areas requiring concentrated attention: committing faculty and staff to the plan, grouping students, working with parents, and organizing the plan. Material includes sample records, progress checklists, letters to parents, and a bibliography.

The Education Opinion Inventory (McLoughlin n.d.) aims to point out those areas likely to be inoperative in a nongraded instructional program. The premise is that efficient identification of such areas may enable educators to institute procedures to rectify the situation and increase the chances of successful nongraded organization. The inventory is therefore constructed to measure teachers' and principals' knowledge and acceptance of the theoretical foundations of the nongraded school. One hundred and four items relate to the areas of individual differences, pupil evaluation and progress, curriculum, instruction, and organization for learning. Each item requires two answers, one on knowledge about the concept and the other on acceptance of it.

The Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh (1970) provides administrators and teachers with a step-by-step guide to the diocesan nongraded program, embodying information on parent-teacher conferences, testing, grouping, and the program mechanics and philosophy. Mathematics and reading skills for different levels are listed, and materials for the basic and supplementary programs are provided.

The results of an evaluation survey by the same diocese (1971) indicate that administrators most frequently mentioned problems in the areas of communication

and reporting pupil progress. The most conspicuous needs were more frequent and more effective explanations of the school program. Teachers made numerous requests for help in grouping techniques, scheduling, and reporting pupil progress; many asked for guidance in establishing a continuum of skills in subject areas other than reading and mathematics. A large number of students reacted favorably to small-group work and independent activities. The majority of the responding parents indicated that their children had evidenced greater interest in school work since the initiation of the continuous progress program.

Smith (1968) discusses practical issues in the implementation of nongraded elementary programs. He details procedures related to staff preparation, curriculum reorganization, grouping, use of teacher aides, and team teaching. In other chapters he examines the role of special teachers, the library and materials center, scheduling of specialists, pupil evaluation, and a general evaluation of the nongraded program.

A monograph by Purdom (1970) reveals the extent to which the concept of nongrading has been twisted to accommodate grading practices. In a sense school administrators have sought to innovate without causing fundamental changes in the existing patterns. Having spelled out his conceptual model for nongraded organization in eleven propositions, Purdom recommends that organization should emphasize provision of alternative learning environments. Suggested procedures include

- manipulation of the composition of the peer group
- varying instructional modes, such as teacher-direction, technology-direction, or independent study
- exploitation of a variety of teaching styles, for example, by using team teaching

In regard to curriculum and instruction, Purdom feels that learning materials should follow an approach based on the structures of the disciplines, include programmed materials, and be located in a resource area equipped with a good record system. Evaluative devices and instruments to be self-administered by the student should be developed.

Twenty articles reprinted from *The National Elementary Principal* (National Association of Elementary School Principals 1968) offer an overview of definitions, history, and research on nongraded systems, and guidelines for planning, establishing, and maintaining a nongraded school. Written largely by professors and principals, the articles cover many topics, including curriculum, preservice and inservice education of principals and teachers, and description of a program in which reading level is the criterion for classroom assignment.

Specific models and guidelines of practical assistance to elementary and secondary administrators appear in a book edited by Kuzsman and MacIsaac (1970). One chapter deals with the problems teachers face in preparing to implement continuous progress and describes a strategy for introduction. Several chapters prepared by elementary teachers and administrators examine the process of transforming an elementary school from a graded to a nongraded basis. The chapters relating to secondary education describe strategies or attempts to develop curricula in the basic disciplines.

A handbook by the same editors (Kuzsman and MacIsaac 1969) serves as a resource book to familiarize teachers with

the basics of nongrading. Chapters deal with the theory of nongrading, as well as the role of the teacher, scheduling, grouping, and pupil evaluation. Detailed examination of the development of a sequential curriculum reveals implications for the language arts, mathematics, and social studies programs. A report on visits to five nongraded schools shows some of the processes of implementation and the variety of practices that may be employed. The document also has an extensive bibliography.

In 1970 the Institute for Development of Educational Activities sponsored a national seminar to examine the status of the nongraded school in the United States and to demonstrate how nongrading and continuous progress work in actual practice. Speakers at the seminar stressed the importance of carefully defining what a nongraded school should be and of using that definition to assess attempts to establish nongraded schools.

To identify and locate the latest and most significant resource materials on innovative programs, Stevens (1972) gathered a comprehensive listing of four thousand sources of information. Many of these concern the implementation of nongraded and continuous progress learning.

NONGRADED EXPERIMENTS

McCarthy (1967) details the application of nongraded principles to a middle school in Liverpool, New York. Multiage groupings of students for each subject recognized individual qualities and capabilities, while organizational and instructional changes involved curriculum reform, flexible scheduling, and team teaching. The author refers to difficulties such as frictions within teams, subject-dominated outlooks, and unwillingness to regroup students. Inadequate evaluation machinery for the innovation was also an underlying problem. Nonetheless, these problems and difficulties were being solved, and progress with the nongraded middle school concept indicates its viability.

An evaluation of the Amherst, Massachusetts, nongraded secondary schools assesses the degree to which they achieved program objectives (Frederickson and others 1968). The objectives emphasized the needs and abilities of the individual student, with progression rates commensurate with ability. In addition, the nongraded curriculum was to offer independent study and to recognize the value of experiences outside formal study. The program was designed to give the student more responsibility in directing his program of study, to encourage self-motivation, and to provide a meaningful appraisal of the student's achievement. Evaluation data reveal that a father's socioeconomic status greatly influences a student's curriculum placement and that more direction is needed in helping a student choose his program of study.

A high school in rural Alaska established a schedule and curriculum that provided both students and teachers with an active voice in determining their educational experiences (Dillingham City School District 1971). The result was a series of over two hundred minicourses offered nongraded through grades seven and nine and scheduled on a modular, trimester basis. Reactions of students, teachers, and outside evaluators appear generally favorable to the new schedule and curriculum. Sample schedules, course offerings and descriptions, and student and teacher questionnaires are appended, as well as an evaluation report and observations by the superintendent.

Eight school systems in the metropolitan

Atlanta area (Henson 1972) cooperatively produced a nongraded program to better meet the changing needs of their youth. Their intent was to devise a plan facilitating greater instructional flexibility and individualization, choice of a greater selection of course options, and expansion of the school year. The result is a new curriculum based on the four-quarter school-year concept. Behavioral objectives, student characteristics, and administrative requirements guide the development of course goals. The author describes the individualized, nonsequential, nongraded program and lists some of its advantages and disadvantages.

COMPARATIVE EVALUATION

Researchers examined grades one through six in a school district in Austin, Texas, designating graded classes as control groups and nongraded classes as experimental (Otto and others 1969). The major hypotheses tested were that there are important differences and similarities between nongraded and graded classes in the following six areas:

- distribution of teachers' instructional time
- the scope of instructional resources used in reading, spelling and arithmetic
- the formation, number, size and achievement range of subgroups
- pupils' use of the centralized library
- children's achievement
- children's school anxiety

Results are mixed, though it would appear, contrary to expectations, that anxiety seems to increase over the year in the nongraded program.

Brown and Theimer (1968) examine an evaluation of reading and arithmetic performance levels in a nongraded elementary school and in a graded control school. Results indicate that the nongraded school showed greater total school achievement. Within year six, students in the nongraded program achieved more than their counterparts. In year four, however, the above-average pupils in the nongraded school achieved less than the average students in the graded school. A nongraded program, therefore, might not be advantageous at all elementary school levels but does appear to be suitable for above-average students in the upper elementary years.

Vogel and Bowers (1969) report on a study testing the validity of the argument that nongraded organization is superior in developing pupil classroom behaviors, attitudes, and achievement. For analysis, nongraded and graded K-6 pupils were divided into normal age, underage, and overage groups.

Results demonstrate that the nongraded school encourages development of conceptual maturity and participation in group activities. Graded organization, however, seems to encourage pupil development in achievement, attitude toward school, and contribution during teaching episodes. Overage pupils in nongraded schools seem to be more contributing members of their classes than their counterparts in graded schools.

In his discussion of a two-year evaluation of nongraded primary schools in New York, McLoughlin (1969) finds that correlations of variables between graded and nongraded classes are insignificant. Results are based not only on analysis of relative pupil progress but also on a very comprehensive list of variables including school organization, beliefs and performances of teachers and

principals, grade placement influences, and demographic and community characteristics.

He concludes that neither school organization nor certain beliefs and performances of educators are significant factors in explaining the differences between graded and nongraded schools. Rather, he stresses that greater involvement of students in monitoring and guiding their own development would characterize a truly nongraded class.

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